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Hans Krabbendam

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1 This book could be summarized in two words “ideas matter,” or by quoting the concluding sentence: “The story of religious controversy in the early republic thus describes the origins of cultural politics in the United States” (241).

2 Eric R. Schlereth, assistant professor of history at the University of Texas in Dallas, focuses his attention on the public debate about the (in)desirability of letting religious authority function in the shaping of a political culture which took place in lectures and periodicals. It is not an analysis of theological disputes or political strategy, but of the civic debate between deists and anti-deists in the formative period of the United States. This approach puts this well-written book in the domain of intellectual history, more than in religious studies or political history.

3 The author analyzes in seven chapters the process of linking private beliefs to the public authority of the state. While it was the purpose of the founding generation to secure religious freedom for the future, the first step of tolerating former dissenters, led to an explicit rejection of other outsiders. By granting non-established denominations a legitimate place in the nation, the new state had to redraw the boundaries between who was in and who was out. These new borders excluded “infidels,” those critical

believers who rejected the trinity of God and the authority of the Bible. It was not only a rejection of these heresies, but the fear for a stable future that turned Christians (restricted to opinion leaders of the formerly established churches) against these "infidels." This label carried a negative connotation, linking heretics with non-Christian believers, most of who lived far away. Because deists were part and parcel of American society, their ideas were dangerous as they undermined tradition as the foundation for the political and moral fabric. This serious threat caused the intensity of the debate. The group of defenders of free enquiry was not large, but ironically it was their growing visibility, through popular books such as Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, lectures, and alleged appeal to the next generation, that fanned anxiety in the insecure formative phase of a vulnerable American nation. The few deists in public office lifted the debate from a theoretical to a practical issue.

4 Schlereth weaves the emerging political debate about the legitimacy to choose one's nationality neatly in the debate about choosing one's religion. This connection linked religion with patriotism. Piety was considered a sign of true love for the nation, whereas unbelief was seen as a liability or worse, treason. The birth of the first party system made these issues prominent. Deists found a home in the Republican Party, while Federalists stood as guardians of tradition.

5 Religious arguments added existential value to the political campaigns of the early 1800s. The party division swallowed the religious debate in 1800 with the arrival of international refugees who had fled religious suppression in Europe. In this sensitive political situation accusations of conspiracy were easily linked to unbelief, which made deists suspect and dangerous. After the war of 1812 subsided, the new evangelical mainstream tried to shape American culture by reform projects for which it created interdenominational institutions. This meant a shift from a debate about religious opinions to a discussion how to best rearrange society to advance improvement. Instead of a theological response to deism, theist believed that an actual change the social circumstances of the nation was the best way to fight deism.

6 This book is a highly original approach to the church-state and religion-politics discourse. It shows the unintended consequences of a liberal arrangement, in which tolerance for one group meant intolerance for others. The argument

also explains the weak tradition of public theological debate, as a result of a shift from theological to public opinion arguments. Thirdly the book illustrates the impact of small group of intellectuals. The strength of distinguishing two opposite factions makes one wonder whether there was really no common ground to be found. A related question in need of elaboration is how it was possible that dissenters felt comfortable in the company of deists in the Republican Party, while in theological disagreement. But these side remarks only emphasize the value of this contribution to the ongoing debate about the relationship between faith and power.

AUTHOR

HANS KRABBENDAM

Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.